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ABSTRACT

Prator (1968) argued strongly for promoting a single standard of English, maintaining that schools have an obligation to teach a native standard of English. The assumption that the educational structure is a productive forum for directing language use is questioned. The report begins with a discussion of the controversy surrounding United States educators' response to Black English Vernacular in the 1960s and 1970s. The second part of the report discusses the implications of the United States' attention to dialect differences for the teaching of a particular standard of English on an international basis. It is suggested that classrooms should be forums for developing language awareness so that students can determine the value of a particular variety of English for their own circumstances, rather than forums to direct language change. (JL)

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VARIATION IN ENGLISH: WHAT ROLE FOR EDUCATION?

Sandra Lee McKay

Prator (1968) in his oft cited article argued strongly for promoting a single standard of English, maintaining that schools have an obligation to teach a native standard of English. As he (1968: 469) put it,

> if teachers in many different parts of the world aim at the same stable, well documented model, the general effort of their instruction will be convergent; the speech of their pupils will become more and more similar to that of pupils in many other regions, and the area within which communication is possible will grow progressively larger.

On the other side, Kachru (1982, 1986) and (Nelson 1988) have argued for the acceptance and encouragement of local varieties of English. Lost in the controversy of what standard to teach is an examination of Prator's underlying assumption that the role of education is to direct language use.

In this paper I intend to question Prator's basic assumption that the educational structure is a productive forum for directing language use. In part, I will support my query by examining the role that the United States educational structure has assumed in dealing with dialect differences. The paper will begin with a discussion of the controversy surrounding United States educators' response to Black English Vernacular in the 1960s and 1970s. The second part of the paper will discuss the implications of United States' attention to dialect differences for the teaching of a particular standard of English on an international basis. It is my thesis that language classrooms should be forums for developing language awareness so that students can determine the value of a particular variety of English for their own circumstances rather than forums to direct language change.

Throughout the paper, I will use the term, *institutionalized varieties* of English as it is defined by Kachru (1986: 19):

> The institutionalized second-language varieties have a long history of acculturation in new cultural and geographical contexts; they have a large range of functions in the local educational, administrative, and legal systems. The result of such uses is that such varieties have developed nativized discourse and style types and functionally determined sublanguages (registers), and are used as a linguistic vehicle for creative writing in various genres.

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Black English Vernacular (BEV) will be used in reference to the variety of English spoken by some members of the black community in the United States whose specific characteristics have been discussed in such works as Labov (1969), Wolfram (1969) and Shuy et. al. (1967). BEV will be considered as an instance of an institutionalized variety with the qualification that it, in contrast to some other institutionalized varieties, has a limited range of functions in "the local educational, administrative and legal system."

UNITED STATES EDUCATION AND DIALECT DIFFERENCES

As Cremins (1965: 113) points out in his discussion of United States education, Americans have traditionally placed great trust in education as a way of addressing social issues. As he says,

> As one reviews the American experience, nothing is more striking than the boundless faith of the citizenry in the power of popular education. It was a faith widely shared by the generation that founded the republic, and it has been an essential article of American belief ever since.... Education has been, par excellence, American's instrument of social progress and reform.

In reference to language issues, Americans have a long tradition of using the schools to impact language change. During the 17th and 18th century, school grammar and spelling books were designed to inculcate what was considered to be "correct" English. In the 1940s, Fries carried on this tradition by maintaining that the role of the schools was to promote a certain variety of English. In his report to the National Council of Teachers of English regarding social class differences in American English, Fries (1940: 15) argued that the schools have the following obligations in regard to language.

1. There can be no correctness apart from usage and the *true* forms of 'standard' English are those that are actually used in that particular dialect. Deviations from these usages are 'incorrect' only when used in the dialect to which they do not belong.
2. *It is the assumed obligation of the schools to attempt to develop in each child the knowledge of and the ability to use the 'standard' English of the United States* (italics mine)--that set of language habits in which the most important affairs of our country are carried on, the dialects of the socially acceptable in most of our communities.
3. The first step in fulfilling that obligation is the making of an accurate and realistic survey and description of the actual language practices in the various social or class dialects. Only after we have such information in hand can we know what social connotations are likely to attach to particular usages.

While Fries' statement reflects a shift from a prescriptive to descriptive view of language, it nonetheless demonstrates a belief that the schools have the obligation to teach a particular standard of English. A focus on the schools as vehicles for language change is further evident in the United States' response to Black English Vernacular during the 1960s.

In the 1960s, due to widespread migration of blacks to northern cities and the passage of the Civil Rights Act, United States educators looked to the schools to deal with the issue of Black English Vernacular. Two prevalent models dominated the discussion of BEV: the deficit model and the different model. Proponents of the deficit model (see Deutsch 1967, Green 1963 and Hurst 1965), who were educators from both the black and white community, viewed BEV in what Ruiz (1988) terms a *language-as-problem* perspective. The special variety of English spoken by blacks was viewed as a problem which limited the blacks' opportunities to succeed educationally and economically in the society. For advocates of the deficit model, the solution to this "problem" was one of replacing BEV with the use of Standard American English (SAE). Thus, according to the deficit model, the role of the school was to work toward the eradication of BEV with the replacement of SAE.

In contrast to the deficit model, proponents of the different model like Labov (1969), Wolfram (1969) and Shuy et. al (1967) maintained that BEV was a legitimate variety of English. Their view was in line with what Ruiz (1988) terms a *language-as-right* perspective in that proponents of the different model argued for the right of BEV speakers to continue to speak their variety of English in addition to acquiring English. They advocated the promotion of bidialectalism (i.e. the ability to speak both BEV and SAE), maintaining that children need to be able to use both varieties of English. While advocates of the deficit and different model held very different assumptions about how to deal with BEV in the schools, in both cases, the schools were viewed as the natural vehicle for impacting language change, whether this change be the replacement of one variety with another or the addition of a new variety to the existing one.

As educators debated whether or not schools should strive to eradicate or add to black children's use of BEV, members of the black community expressed ambivalent attitudes toward BEV. To the extent that members of the black community believed that the use of BEV minimized their chances for social and economic mobility, they were motivated to acquire Standard American English. Martin Luther King speaking in Selma just before the civil rights march to the capital associated BEV with other disadvantages of the black community:

> Those of us who are Negroes don't have much. We have known the long night of poverty. Because of the system, we don't have much education and many of us don't know how to make our nouns and our verbs agree (King as quoted in Cazden 1966: 186).

Other black leaders, however, doubted that the acquisition of SAE was the real key to economic and social mobility within the community. As Carmichael (1968: 72) put it, black people are told from birth that

> 'if you work hard, you'll succeed' - but if that were true black people would own this country. We are oppressed because we are black - not because we are ignorant, not because we are lazy, not because we're stupid (and got good rhythm), but because we're black.

Regardless of their view on the reasons for social discrimination, black leaders rarely used BEV in their public speeches. As Labov (1968: 219) points out, black leaders who opposed middle-class society with the most radical nationalist positions were inevitably standard speakers. There is then a fundamental contradiction:

> Those who would like to use the vernacular as a sign of solidarity with the community, find themselves derogating that community by so doing - demonstrating that its leaders are too ignorant to speak correctly. The social values attributed to NNE (Negro Nonstandard English) are those appropriate to informal colloquial communication.

As black leaders like Carmichael explored various social reasons for blacks' position in society, many teachers of English continued to make the argument that SAE was essential to providing blacks with equal educational and economic opportunities. As Smiley (1964: 42) put it,

> English teachers presumably agree with Fries' observation that language habits are widely used as a basis for making status judgements and that the school has an assumed obligation to provide the child 'no matter what his original social background and speech' with the language habits that constitute a passport to social mobility.

Toward the end of the 1960s, however, a few educators began to question the role of education in directing language use. Moffett (1968: 36), one of the most renowned figures in English education, argued that

> if standard English grammar, as behavior, is considered desirable, then let 'disadvantaged' students speak with those who use the standard dialect. They will learn it the same way they learned their local dialect and for the same reason--that they are members of a speech community where it is native.

Sledd (1969), another leading figure in English education, argued that the idea of promoting bidialectalism was a reflection of a type of linguistic white supremacy. Maintaining that it was social segregation which led blacks to use a different language, he argued that what schools should be doing to minimize racial prejudice is familiarizing speakers of SAE with BEV and other varieties of spoken English so that these speakers learned to accept and appreciate variation in American English. For Sledd the role of the school was to encourage an appreciation of dialect differences rather than to work toward an elimination or replacement of dialect differences. (For a full discussion of the role of education in regard to BEV during the 1960s, see McKay, 1971.)

Moffett (1968) and Sledd's (1969) contention that changes in language use are basically a function of the social structure rather than the educational structure was further supported by research in the late sixties by Labov (1968) and Shuy et. al. (1967) which demonstrated how standards of use and usage are, to a large extent, a function of an individual's speech community. The debate as to whether or not the United States educational structure should be involved in promoting a particular variety of American English is far from settled. However, the language debates of the sixties and seventies did bring to the forefront the question of to what extent the schools can and should be involved in directing language use. Perhaps it is time, both on the national and international level, for a recognition of the limitations of educational institutions as vehicles for language change.

TEACHING LANGUAGE AWARENESS VERSUS TEACHING LANGUAGE STANDARDS

Nelson (1988) in his discussion of World Englishes points out that "it may be easier for an outsider to accept the existence and validity of a national variety than for an insider to come to the same terms with his English." Similarly it is likely easier for an outsider to accept the existence and validity of institutionalized varieties of English than for an insider to do so. Thus, as an outsider to the issue of institutionalized varieties of English, it is perhaps easier for me to question the role of the schools in promoting a particular variety of English than for one involved in the debate to do so. However, the long standing tradition in the United States of looking to the schools to deal with all social issues has led me to question the extent to which schools, in isolation, can effect changes in social behavior. There is I think on both a national and international level a need to critically examine what role education can and should play in the larger social context. While an examination of the role of English education may lead educators to place less emphasis on teaching a particular standard of English, such an examination may result in the schools assuming other important roles such as the following.

1. Developing an Awareness of Language Variation.

Beginning with the students' native language, teachers might demonstrate the manner in which language varies according to region, social class, gender and context. In reference to English, teachers might illustrate the ways in which spoken English in particular differs from one country to another. In order to do this, English educators on an international level need to develop a great many more types of listening material as a way of exemplifying for their students the variation of English in a world context.

2. Developing an Awareness of Language Appropriateness.

Beginning with the native language, teachers might illustrate how the form of the language used needs to be suited to the social situation. Drawing on markers of formal and informal discourse in the native language, teachers could illustrate how speakers, if they wish to fulfill their objectives, need to select a form that is appropriate for the context. The idea of appropriateness might then be extended to an international basis where, particularly in terms of written English, certain standards will be more appropriate than others.

3. Developing Strategies for Dealing with a Lack of Intelligibility

Using the native language, teachers could demonstrate what strategies speakers might use when they do not fully understand what is said. After demonstrating various strategies of repair in the native language, the teacher might shift to English, providing examples of language forms for seeking clarification and repetition. The goal might be what Baxter (1983: 106-107) calls *interactive listening*. As he says.

> (V)ariation in the English used by interactors in international situations is inevitable. The pedagogical goal thus becomes one of producing in students a range of skills of adaption, many of which fall under the rubric of listening comprehension....The addressee needs to be able to ask for clarification and for repetition; the addressee needs to be able to counter lexical variation with, 'What does that mean?'; he or she needs to be able to formulate a paraphrase and ask, 'Is that what you mean?' In short, from an EIL perspective, listening comprehension is an aspect of mutual interaction of participants in a communicative situation. We should thus speak of *interactive listening*.

For those students who will be using English in an international context, having skill in interactive listening will enable them to deal with misunderstanding arising language from variation. By focusing on this skill, the classroom becomes a vehicle for helping students deal with variability rather than trying to direct it.

The idea of using the language classroom as a forum for developing language awareness is a current goal of British education. Language Awareness curriculums in Great Britain are designed to help students explore the role of language in human communication and value the variation of language. According to Martin-Jones (1988: 22), the primary reasons for enacting such curriculums are as follows.

> First, it is argued that language awareness work can help learners make explicit the tacit knowledge they already have about language. Second, proponents of language awareness work believe that it offers a way of combating social and linguistic prejudices and promoting greater inter-ethnic understanding in the classroom. Thirdly, it is claimed that bilingual minority children derive a number of benefits from the inclusion of their home languages on the classroom agenda.

The ultimate goal of the Language Awareness curriculum in Britain is to encourage young people to see language as a resource and to develop their learning about language. Similar goals might be enacted on an international basis with schools striving to promote in students a sense of the richness and power of language so that they can better assess what it is they need to learn about a particular language in order to fulfill their academic and professional goals. In this way the role of the schools would shift from one of directing language use to one of promoting language awareness. Teachers of English would continue to teach the variety of English they speak and teach a generally accepted form of written English, but they would do so in a way which helps students to realize the complexity of language and the need to use appropriate language for the particular context. Enabling students to see the power and value of various forms of English would be the goal and not the homogenization of all English speakers. In order for such a goal to be reached, we, as educators, need to place less emphasis on debating what standard of English we should teach and greater emphasis on examining what should be the role of English education in the larger social context.

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